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POLITICS

Sheboygan leader uses racist slur in meeting. then city administrator's response raises more concerns



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SHEBOYGAN - A city director's use of an offensive term for Black people and the way the Sheboygan administrator responded have exacerbated what residents say are persistent equity issues at City Hall.

Chad Pelishek, Sheboygan's director of Planning and Development, said the N-word during an internal meeting of department heads in August.

Pelishek said the slur while quoting a resident's comment from a neighborhood meeting. He used the offensive word as an example of a racist incident brought to his attention and asked other department heads how the city can help address racial issues at the neighborhood level, City Administrator Todd Wolf said.

Wolf was concerned not that a white department head repeated the racist term but that other staff members told people outside the meeting about the incident.

"(Pelishek) thought he was in a safe space — and obviously one person let that out to their friends group," Wolf said. He said he was "disappointed" in a director who "let the information out."

Wolf added, "I don't want to see this employee (Pelishek) have a big tarnish on them for something that's not fair."

Wolf's reaction to the use of the offensive word in a city meeting has created concerns of its own.

"(Pelishek's) misstep is one thing," said Ale Guevara, a Sheboygan resident who said community members already have been concerned about equity and inclusion issues in city

government. “But their (city leaders’) inability to deal with it reflects the deeper underlying issues that are happening.

“We don’t believe in retribution. This is not about ‘How is Mr. Pelishek going to be punished?’” Guevara said. “This is about, when are they going to do something to correct this, instead of hiding it? When are they going to do something about the toxicity in the city?”

As city administrator, Wolf is the primary person to address complaints about staff conduct because Sheboygan has no human resources director, said city council member Trey Mitchell, chairman of the Finance and Personnel Committee.

The human resources position has been vacant since former director Vicky Schneider resigned in June after suing the city, alleging Wolf retaliated against her for opposing sexual harassment of a female city employee, according to her complaint filed with the state Department of Workforce Development.

As of Friday, the state agency had not responded to a question of whether Schneider's case remains open.

Pelishek referred a reporter to the mayor and city administrator for comment.

As director of Planning and Development, Pelishek works with developers and local businesses, oversees code enforcement and community development block grant funding, attends city meetings and helps with programming, Wolf said.

Pelishek has been the department director since 2010, according to his LinkedIn profile.

Pelishek — whom Wolf called the “poster boy” of “other duties as assigned” — is also sustainability coordinator and sits on multiple boards and commissions, serving as chairman of the Sustainable Task Force and Sheboygan Area Room Tax Commission. He developed the city’s first strategic plan and is chairman of the current revision of the plan, Wolf said.

Director to peers: 'I am sorry if you were offended'

In the August department head meeting, no one spoke up after Pelishek repeated the slur, Wolf said.

The vast majority of department heads are white. At least one is Black.

After the meeting, Wolf emailed department heads apologizing for not immediately correcting a “misstep from a team member” but said the statement with the slur was not

intended to be offensive. His email did not mention Pelishek by name.

In an interview with the Sheboygan Press, Wolf wavered on whether Pelishek using the slur was acceptable given the context.

“He did use the phrase, not with the intent to hurt or harm anyone, but with the intent to help others understand,” Wolf said. “You start going, well, what’s the N-word? What’s the R-word? ... It’s like, how do you get people to understand what you’re talking about that’s not acceptable (to say)?”

Wolf later said, “Racial slurs, my team already knows that’s not acceptable, even in the context of educating and communicating.”

Pelishek emailed a brief apology to department heads the morning after saying the slur.

“I regret saying [sic] full N word out loud and if I offended anyone it was not intended to be directed that way. I am sorry if you were offended,” he wrote.

Pelishek’s apology and Wolf’s response both fell short, Guevara said.

“‘I’m sorry if you felt offended?’ No, ‘I’m sorry if I offended you. I need to learn,’” she said. “And nobody checks his response to make sure he’s doing it the right way? To me, that’s negligence. So it goes beyond the misstep.”

City leaders should show not only that they are sorry, but that they are willing to do something about it, Guevara said.

“Show us that you really care,” she said. “They need to start protecting the people they are working with and the people they are working for. Because really, their bosses are the community members. Many voices are still not heard, and we don’t see change.”

Mayor Ryan Sorenson, who was not at the meeting in which Pelishek said the slur, said he cannot speak on personnel issues when asked if Pelishek was reprimanded, and is "not primarily responsible for human resources-type issues like this."

The incident was "a learning opportunity, not only for (Pelishek), but for everyone else," Sorenson said. "I think this is a reflection of how we can do better and how we can raise the bar for our team and understand what is appropriate and what's not appropriate in these conversations."

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Expert: Why this slur, said by a white person, hurts no matter the context

Whether retelling a story or not, it is not OK for white people to say the N-word, which was derived from the Latin word for the color black and turned into a derogatory term for enslaved people, said Leslie Laster, Director for Diversity, Accessibility and Support Services at Moraine Park Technical College.

“Some Black people, not all, use the word and have reclaimed it,” Laster said. “All Black people don’t agree with that, but some do, and it was just a way to say, ‘You can’t hurt me with this word anymore.’”

“Everyone knows what the word is, and it is just as easy to say ‘the N-word,’” she said. “It comes down to education and empathy.”

Someone should have addressed it immediately in the meeting and later checked in on everyone in the meeting, Laster said.

“You also can’t assume that that word isn’t going to offend people, even if everyone in the room were white — you know, because of who they love, who they’re associated with, who their friends are,” she said.

“That doesn’t create a safe meeting. That creates a meeting for certain people to say certain things, and that’s not how you create psychological safety in the workplace.”

Administrator focuses on the leak, not the slur

The day Pelishek used the racist word, Wolf told department heads not to talk about “departmental interactions” with other people.

“Please remember that our Department head meetings are to help us learn together, but only topics are to be shared with your departments,” he wrote in an email. “The departmental interactions and discussions are part of the safe space that we all need. Please feel free to contact me to discuss further to help clarify and show support. Thanks for your continued support in making the City a great place of belonging.”

Within the next few days, Wolf hired a diversity, equity and inclusion consultant to facilitate an “emergency meeting” with department heads, he said.

Sorenson said the meeting with the DEI consultant was to reaffirm the city's commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion work going forward.

"It was to say this was a situation that was not correct, and set the expectation for the senior leadership team of how we move forward and get better from it," Sorenson said.

Wolf said his concern was that a staff member talked about the incident outside of the department head meeting.

"People knew there was a breach of trust, and I just wanted them to understand that moving forward, we still want (department meetings) to be a space of trust," he said in response to a question about what the meeting with the DEI consultant addressed.

"Part of DEI is ... the understanding that we can and should be able to make a mistake but have a safe enough space that we can support each other through it," he said.

"We didn't know that some information was out until I talked with you, and it's like, the mayor and I were beside ourselves," Wolf told a reporter.

Wolf said he reached out to staff members, including a department head who is Black, "apologizing, things like that, saying, 'Hey, I hope you understand. I just don't want to see this blow up anymore.'"

City leaders are not trying to hide what happened but are concerned that Pelishek's comment is being taken out of context, Wolf said.

"Depending on how the (newspaper article) is written, we're going to reprimand further a good employee, and we're going to end up trashing another employee who obviously let the comment out," he said. "That employee is going to have problems because let's just face it, people are not going to trust the safe space anymore."

All city directors contacted by the Sheboygan Press declined to comment or referred a reporter to the mayor and city administrator for comment.

More: Post-2020, Sheboygan County businesses strengthen their commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion

More: Most of Sheboygan's city council members are new in the past three years. Here's a look at age, gender and racial diversity on the council.

Diversity and inclusion are priorities, city leaders say

Better serving Sheboygan's increasingly diverse community is something Sorenson campaigned on as mayor last year, he said.

Wolf also said promoting diversity, equity and inclusion is a focus for Sheboygan leaders.

About one in three people in Sheboygan (31%) is Latino, Asian, multiracial or Black, including about 1,630 city residents who identify as Black or African American and an additional 3,950 residents who are multiracial, according to the 2020 U.S. Census.

In the past two years, the city has done a lot to promote diversity and inclusion — or ensure that people of different backgrounds are treated fairly and feel comfortable and valued — while that was not a focus in the past, Sorenson and Wolf said.

Last year, the city required all employees to attend a DEI workshop about creating authentic relationships in the workplace and initiated mandatory annual trainings for all employees that include anti-harassment training. Managers also participated in a virtual training about othering and belonging, Sorenson said.

This year, the city implemented leadership trainings for 40 managers and supervisors that include topics such as inclusive leadership. The city has also offered optional trainings related to queer identities, disabilities and other topics, and is consulting with UW-Green Bay for further training opportunities, Sorenson said.

Since 2021, the city has also implemented a language line for all city services, updated the wording in job postings to reach a broader audience and initiated a DEI assessment of internal policies.

The city is incorporating diversity, equity and inclusion concepts into Sheboygan's strategic plan, integrating DEI language into the employee handbook and annual reviews, and updating pronoun language in the municipal code, Sorenson said.

“The big point I want to hammer home is we still have a ton more work to do,” he said.

“We have a lot more work to do internally, setting the standard higher not only for our senior leadership team, where the bar needs to be the highest it can be, but also for all 400-plus city staff, to make sure that we're providing equitable, responsible resources to the citizens of Sheboygan,” Sorenson said.

“(Diversity and inclusion) is everybody’s responsibility. It’s woven within a lot of the work that we do.”

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